

Staging the Odyssey

Greg Doran

Staging Homer's great adventure story, the *Odyssey*, has been something of an epic in itself. When I first proposed the idea to the Royal Shakespeare Company, they laughed. Nevertheless, a year later, there we were, in the rehearsal room of The Other Place Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon tackling the Sirens, Cyclops, Scylla and Charybdis, and the rest of Homer's gruesome catalogue of monsters.

The first step was to find a writer brave enough to assume Homer's mantle. I wanted a poet, a story teller and a theatre practitioner, and decided to approach the Caribbean poet, Derek Walcott. His work is pervaded with a sense of the sea, and of exotic islands, albeit in a different archipelago.

Western Literature it is said, explodes into being with the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. They have been at the centre of our heritage for over two millennia. Scholars have squabbled over a definitive text since the second century BC. But before it was ever written down, it would have been recounted from memory by generations of storytellers, the rhapsodes, the stitchers of songs, each one doubtless elaborating and embellishing the tale from his own imagination. Derek Walcott would continue this tradition, recounting the story from his own experience of the world, as a father, a son, a husband, as a black man, a wanderer, an exile. And as a poet, he chose to render his play in a flexible hexameter verse, in quatrain structure of individual lines with an alternate line rhyme scheme. This drives the story forward with a terrific dynamic thrust, and a beat which both holds the tension, and the audience's attention.

Managing the monsters

So how did we set about tackling all those monsters and myths? It was a long collaborative process involving a large number of people: designer, composer, sound and lighting designers, a movement specialist, and several workshops, before we ever got to rehearsal. Here are a few highlights in our odyssey of discovery.

As Odysseus is nearing home, his sailors steal a large oxhide bag, given to him by King Aeolus, the Guardian of the Winds. The sailors believe it must be full of gold and untie it. In fact it contains the West wind which billows out of the bag into a hurricane force gale, sweeping the ship away from the coast of Ithaca for good.

In our production the ship is created simply, with ropes attached to a tall mast which stands permanently on the stage. Aeolus's bag is made to look like oxbide and contains a heavy duty balloon which can be inflated every night. The actors have to carry it as if it is very heavy indeed, so as not to give away the surprise. When they then open the bag it deflates with a loud fart. The ship's lanterns begin to swing indicating a storm brewing, and the bag makes two little coughs. As the sailors investigate, a fire extinguisher (concealed under the stage, below the deflated bag) is triggered off, blasting a plume of smoke into the air. This is cued with the sound and lights and the tempest begins.

One of the first islands Odysseus and his crew land upon is the island of the Cyclops, the great one-eyed shepherd who traps Odysseus in his cave and eats his men, until the hero blinds him with a stake. As a race the Cyclopes are a leaderless group, with no laws, no crops, no social organization, and thus they represent the greatest threat to a fledgling democracy, anarchy. In addressing this story then, Derek Walcott imagined what kind of monsters we fear as a society now, and created the Cyclops as a ruthless dictator, ruling by the tyranny of state apparatus, his all-seeing eye, like Big brother in Orwell's 1984. In order to destroy him Odysseus must blind the eye and release his people from their sheep-dom. The scene is gripping, but retains what must be the oldest joke in literature, when the Cyclops, fooled into believing that Odysseus is called "Nobody" yells for help, crying "Nobody blinded me"!

Combining Circe and Calypso

As Derek Walcott was born in the Caribbean on the island of St Lucia, the prospect of staging "Calypso" presented only one option, and Circe's island is introduced with Calypso music. In Homer, Circe is an enchantress who turns men into wild animals; surely a sexual metaphor. In Walcott's retelling of the story, she is played as a carnival queen, presiding over a brothel, where her drugged and drunken clientele are masked like pigs and behave like them as well. When Odysseus foils her plan by eating an antidote to her drug, provided by the gods, Circe takes him to her bed.

It is Circe who directs Odysseus to the Underworld, and therefore Walcott introduces a ritual appropriate to that island setting, a voodoo or shango ceremony. It is fascinating to realise that the Shango and the libations described by Homer have essentially the same elements. Indeed the Gods brought over to the Caribbean by the slaves from Western Africa may have shared roots with the Greek pantheon of Gods; Maman de l'eau with Athena; Shango, the thunderer with Zeus; Ogun, the spirit of War with Ares; and Baron Samedi, who watches over the cemeteries, with Pluto.

In creating the Underworld for a modern audience, Walcott tried to identify what such a place would mean for us now, in a largely unbelieving society. Homer's underworld, unlike

Virgil's and Dante's, is not under ground, but Walcott finds a modern equivalent to this limbo of lost souls, endlessly waiting to be transported by the infernal ferryman, and locates the scene in his own vision of Hades, the London Underground. I've been on the Circle Line, I know it's Hell. Thus his dead mother stands on the next platform eternally waiting for her train, and the ghosts of his comrades flash past in a subterranean vision.

One element of the story concerned us for a long time: how to stage the Sirens, with their irresistible song, so beautiful it could lure men to their deaths. Any composer would be daunted by such a task. We therefore leave the sound entirely to the imagination. We have a tape of lapping surf running continuously throughout the scene. At the moment when the sailors have tied Odysseus to the mast and cram wax into their ears, we cut out all sound. The effect is just like what happens when the central heating suddenly cuts out; you notice the absence of the sound, the silence is audible. So here, the sea stops. And in that silence as you watch Odysseus writhe in the ecstasy of the song he alone hears, you can only imagine how beautiful it must be. Once they have rowed past the sirens, the sailors unplug their ears and the sound of the sea comes crashing back into the scene.

Back in Ithaca

Once Odysseus returns to Ithaca we face more challenges; how to present the loom, the hundred suitors all waiting for Penelope's hand, and the contest of the great bow.

Penelope has been working on her great loom for three years, promising to marry one of the suitors when the shroud she is weaving is finished. Unbeknown to them she unpicks the day's work every night. We wanted this image on the stage and were concerned to find which type of loom it could be. A free-standing mechanical loom would be too cumbersome, and moving on and off a large piece of stage furniture would be a problem, so we chose a backstrap loom, in which Penelope sits and which is attached to the totem pole on the stage already used as the mast of Odysseus' s ship. The combination of these two images not only has a certain reverberation, it also satisfies a cunning Greek pun, as the word for mast in Greek, "histos", is also the word for loom.

The contest to string Odysseus' great bow and shoot through the twelve axe heads needed some thought, as no safety officer would allow us to fire an arrow with the audience sitting so close. It had to be done by trickery.

Scholars have debated how these twelve axes were set up. I doubt if any of them have ever actually tried it. We settled for pairs of double headed axes crossed with fixed blades, set up in a row one pair behind the next so that the test is to fire between the holes made by the curving axe tips. When Odysseus fires the arrow we misdirect the audience's attention, like any good stage magician. The arrow seems to leave Odysseus' bow and ends up shivering in

the mast behind the axes. In fact Odysseus has palmed his arrow and a second arrow has been secretly lodged in the mast when no one was looking and "twanged" to look and sound as if it has just hit the target. The twang is in fact provided by flicking a spring doorstop attached behind the mast.

A similar sleight of hand is used to kill the suitors. The first to be slain is the bully Antinous, with an arrow in the throat. As Odysseus aims the bow at him, Athena places an arrow in the suitor's hand. As Odysseus fires the bow, again palming his arrow, Antinous sweeps Athena's arrow up to his throat with a scream. Despite the fact that Athena has handed the arrow to him in full view to the audience, people are constantly baffled and ask how this effect was achieved.

The ensuing slaughter is done ritualistically with only five actors playing all one hundred suitors, as they attack Odysseus.

Does it matter that Walcott has changed certain elements of Homer's story, presenting Cyclops as a dictator, Circe as a carnival queen and so on? I don't think so. Every age has translated Homer, Pope for the Augustans, Chapman for the Elizabethans, and many great writers have adapted the myths one way or the other. James Joyce did so with *Ulysses* at the beginning of the century and Walcott continues this tradition, as the century ends, the *Odyssey* itself will always be there.

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